

VZCZCXR07582
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHAE #0204/01 1001436
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 091436Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9593
RUEHPNH/NVC PORTSMOUTH NH 0310
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 0140
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 0438
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1425
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1290
RUEHGA/AMCONSUL CALGARY 0017
RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 0037
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0099
RUEHFT/AMCONSUL FRANKFURT 1323
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN 0029
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES 0010
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 0009

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 ASMARA 000204

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/CA, AF/E, CA/FPP, CA/EX

DEPT PASS TO INL/HSTC

DEPT PASS TO KCC WILLIAMSBURG KY

POSTS FOR FRAUD PREVENTION MANAGERS

FRANKFURT FOR RCO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: CVIS KFRD CPAS CMGT ASEC ER
SUBJECT: FRAUD SUMMARY - ASMARA

REFS: A. 07 ASMARA 000967,

1B. 07 ASMARA 000815,
1C. 07 STATE 171211

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11. The following is a summary of fraud conditions experienced during the January to March 2008 period. Point of contact is Conoff Brian Shelbourn, shelbournbl@state.gov, 291-1-12-00-04.

12. (SBU) COUNTRY CONDITIONS

The Government of the State of Eritrea's (GSE) economic policies continue to cause scarcity of goods and impoverishment of the people. Employment prospects are virtually non-existent. Of those employed, many work as draftees in the Eritrean national service which provides wages barely a step above slave labor, approximately \$30 and \$40 per month. Commodities such as cooking gas, diesel fuel, sugar, and lentils are strictly rationed and are sometimes unavailable due to restrictions on imports and the government's holding of hard currency. In 2007 Eritrea's inflation rate was 25.6% and per capita GDP was only \$220. The GSE continues to press large numbers of citizens into long, undefined periods of military service. Disenchantment continues to build, especially among the young. This has led to a massive illegal exodus across the borders of Sudan and Ethiopia, with as many as 2,000 leaving Eritrea illegally each month.

Mandatory national service begins at the age of 17 for both boys and girls, and includes intensive military training. For males, while the official end date is the age of 40, in practice there is no end

date to the term of national service; in some cases, individuals have been working in the national service for over 13 years. Because of this, many parents seek any avenue to get their children out of the country prior to be conscripted, even at the risk of their own arrest. Those unable to obtain permission to leave Eritrea often illegally flee across the border to either Sudan or Ethiopia to escape the harsh conditions. Many people with passports leave legally and do not return. The desperation to leave Eritrea is felt at all levels of society.

The consular section in Asmara has been closed to most visa services since January 2007, but has continued limited issuances for extreme humanitarian cases and those clearly in USG interests. The section provides document intake services for Immigrant and Diversity visas, transfers cases to other posts upon request, and provides document verification services to other U.S. Embassies which process Eritrean applicants. Post anticipates remaining closed for visa services for the immediate future, but continues to provide the full array of American Citizen Services.

Asmara is considered a medium fraud post, with potential to become high as profit-motivated fraud rings learn to take advantage of a population desperate to escape the GSE's oppressive policies.

13. (SBU) NIV FRAUD

Post is not currently issuing NIVs in significant numbers and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period. Asmara has traditionally been considered to be a medium fraud post for NIVs.

Student visas - The University of Asmara provides reliable student record verification. Posts interviewing Eritrean students should be aware that the University graduated its final class in 2007 and is no longer operating. Eritrea currently has no accredited tertiary schools. Post's F-1 validation study for 2006 issuances showed 90%

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of students continuing their University studies beyond the first year. Nearly all student visas issued in Asmara in 2006 were for students to larger, well-known institutions and/or for graduate students.

B1/B2 visas - Post completed 2005 and 2006 validation studies during the reporting period. The study demonstrated that applicants over 50 years old remain the group least likely to overstay, although 35% to 50% did not return. Many of these recipients had children in the U.S. and adjusted status while visiting, rather than go through the petition process. Very few visas were issued to applicants aged 20 to 40, but those applicants that were issued were likely to overstay.

R visas - Post's validation studies for 2005 and 2006 indicated a 100% overstay for all R visas issued.

14. (SBU) IV FRAUD

Post is not currently issuing IVs in significant numbers and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period. Asmara has traditionally been considered to be a medium fraud post for IVs.

Marriage fraud has always been a concern of the consular section due to the number of arranged marriages. The fraud seen in Eritrea is typical of many other countries, except that it is neither highly organized nor sophisticated. It tends to be fairly easy to detect, in that the Amcits in the relationship typically leaves Eritrea immediately after the marriage to file the petition and then maintains little or no contact until documentation is requested. Also, all marriages in Eritrea are grand affairs, with even impoverished families having elaborate ceremonies recorded on video. Any marriage not performed with an elaborate religious service or not having video documentation is highly suspect.

Post completed adjudication of two cases of petitioners attempting to obtain IR2 visas for nieces or nephews. The fraudulent applications were discovered through the use of DNA testing.

15. (SBU) DV FRAUD

Post is not currently issuing DVs in significant numbers and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period. Asmara has traditionally been considered to be a medium fraud post for DVs.

16. (SBU) ACS AND PASSPORT FRAUD

Post has experienced no cases of ACS or passport fraud during the reporting period. Asmara has traditionally been considered to be a low fraud post for ACS and passports.

Conoff remains vigilant in identifying increased passport/CRBA fraud indicators, is surprised at the lack of fraud indicators in this area, and expects to see an increase in the future. Eritrea's resident Amcit community is small and mostly static. The majority of passport renewals are for individuals known by consular staff. For those applicants not known by the staff, a direct comparison of the applicant, the current passport picture, and PIERS information is performed to ensure identity. For CRBA applicants of recently born babies, the mother's hospital stay certificate is routinely requested and verified with the hospital as needed.

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Post is concerned about the number of CRBA applications for older children. For out of wedlock births or for recently issued birth certificates for older children, Conoff routinely recommends DNA testing. To date, no negative tests or abandoned cases have been discovered.

17. (SBU) ADOPTION FRAUD

Post is not currently processing adoption cases in significant numbers and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period.

Like other types of fraud, adoption fraud is neither organized nor sophisticated but it is becoming more prevalent. The most common form of fraud is the classification of a child as an orphan while the birth parents are still alive and able to support the child. The usual reasons for adoption fraud are to improve the economic condition of the child by having them live with a U.S. relative or to avoid national service. Eritrean adoptions are usually only given to family members and are easy for them to obtain. The Eritrean adoption is then used as the basis for a U.S. adoption case.

Although adoptions are reviewed by either the High Court or the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare, the corrupt legal system in Eritrea provides fraud opportunities for those with high government connections. Post notes a recent case where an adopting Amcit claimed she discovered after the adoption that the parents of the children she adopted were living high-ranking GSE officials. Post is unable to confirm the allegation.

18. (SBU) DNA TESTING

Post uses DNA testing primarily for out-of-wedlock births and for first-time citizenship applications for older children, but notes no negative results. There are also many instances of aunts/uncles petitioning a niece/nephew as an IR2 to provide better economic opportunity or to avoid the harsh conditions of mandatory military service. Post will continue to liberally recommend DNA testing for IR2 applications if/when the visa section reopens, and advises posts

processing Eritrean IVs to consider doing the same.

Post notes Eritrean family and social structures are conducive to obtaining reliable DNA results. Family relationships tend to be well-defined and along American norms, and there is no influx of refugees or migrants. Eritrea has some isolated ethnic groups, such as the Nara, with which the consular section has little or no interaction.

19. (SBU) ASYLUM FRAUD

Post is not currently issuing Visas 92/93 in significant numbers and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period.

110. (SBU) ALIEN SMUGGLING

Eritrea is a source country for illegal travelers, but not as an organized system designed to facilitate travel to the U.S. Eritrean men under 40 and unmarried women under 27 generally cannot obtain passports, but the specific rules are opaque and change frequently and without notice. Men under 54 and women under 47, even those

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with passports, are routinely denied exit visas. 2,000 Eritreans illegally cross the Sudanese and Ethiopian borders each month. Smugglers charge between \$1,000 and \$7,000 for the service. The smugglers are reportedly Eritrean military, police, or national security officers, but there are also reports of Rashaida (a trans-national ethnic group known to be traders) involvement. There are neither reports nor indications of local fraud rings dedicated to facilitating illegal travel to the U.S.

Approximately 4,800 Somali refugees reside near Massawa. A UNHCR representative noted that an undefined number of Somalis in the camp have "moved on" to other countries.

111. (SBU) DS CRIMINAL FRAUD INVESTIGATIONS

Conoff and RSO have had reduced opportunities to collaborate on fraud investigations due to the closure of the visa section, but ACS case hits are immediately shared and discussed. RSO responds to consular requests expeditiously. Both RSO and Conoff look forward to increased cooperation on investigations when the visa section eventually reopens.

112. (SBU) HOST COUNTRY PASSPORTS,
IDENTITY DOCUMENTS, AND CIVIL REGISTRY

The Eritrean passport has no identifiable security features. Bio data is hand-written, photographs are physically placed, and the lamination is of extremely poor quality. In addition, an Eritrean passport is not proof of nationality. Reports circulate of Somali, Sudanese, and other non-Eritreans traveling on Eritrean tourist and diplomatic passports. The Eritrean national ID card is the only document proving nationality, but it too is hand written (only in Tigrinya and Arabic, not English), poorly laminated, and easily altered. Conoff noted a recently issued diplomatic passport with the bio information on an internal page, rather than the front cover, a small but welcome improvement. The GSE has given no indication of further improvements to its passport and has rebuffed requests from Conoff to discuss the matter.

A recently issued Eritrean passport in Khartoum may be a sign that the applicant has left Eritrea illegally. The GSE freely issues passports to Eritrean nationals living abroad, even if they depart illegally. Post speculates the government facilitates these passports in hopes that the departed will remit hard currency after settlement in wealthier countries.

Posts using completion of Eritrean National Service as a sign of ties to Eritrea should be aware of reliable reports that a source in Dubai is supplying false national service completion certificates. Conoff has yet to examine a false certificate, but official certificates have no known security features and are easily forged. The GSE will not provide verification of completion of military/national service.

Conoff received information during the reporting period that "official" birth and marriage certificates are available for sale for 5,000 Nakfa (\$333.33) from the Asmara (and presumably other) municipalities. The GSE recently pushed responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of applicant information down to the neighborhood level official in an effort to improve accuracy and accountability. Instead, the move created profit-making opportunities. Information contained on official birth and marriage certificates can be completely altered, per the request of the payer. On a positive

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note, the Asmara municipality has recently computerized these records and is assigning a unique identification number to each person. This system will eventually roll-out to all towns and villages in Eritrea, and shows some indication of GSE willingness to combat fraud.

113. (SBU) COOPERATION WITH HOST GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

Post continues to receive no cooperation on consular issues from the host government, other than routine document verification. However, because even legitimately issued governmental documents are suspect, this cooperation is of limited use. School records tend to be very well kept and there is a history of cooperation with local schools regarding verifying these documents. Post had a 2006 case of suspected fraud in which the school verifiers seemed reluctant to provide negative information due to the stature of the individual's family. Post anticipates that if we were to identify organized fraud rings that the local authorities would take an interest, but to date, post has seen no evidence indicating the existence of this type of organized smuggling in-country.

Conoff is attempting to secure an agreement for a DHS trainer to instruct GSE immigration officers and airline staff members on U.S. travel documents. GSE immigration officials have recently been reluctant to meet with Emboffs, but six months ago the Director of Immigration at Asmara International Airport expressed interest in such training, which Conoff will continue to pursue.

114. (SBU) AREAS OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

The increasing desperation of Eritreans resulting in increasing attempts to leave the country by any means available has not led to an increase in fraud indicators, as would be reasonably expected. Post remains vigilant in looking for fraud indicators, especially for new passport and CRBA applications, and assumes that an increase in fraudulent applications is highly likely given the current political and economic situation in Eritrea.

A large number of NIV applicants are expected when the consular section reopens for visa services. The usual walk-in application process will not be able to accommodate the volume. At such time that post reopens for visa services, Post plans to employ the online NIV appointment system and an active public diplomacy program to avoid the common problems with queuing in areas outside of Embassy control.

The Harris technicians who maintain consular computer systems did not receive visas from the GSE and were not able to make their scheduled visit in June 2007. The technicians have pending visa applications for the last week of April 2008, but have yet to be issued. Although the section can function in the

short-to-intermediate term with local technicians, if this situation is not addressed in the long run, the consular section could be forced to shut down completely in the event of a catastrophic failure of the computer systems.

115. (SBU) STAFFING AND TRAINING

The section remains short staffed during our closure and will remain so until the section fully opens for visa services. Training options are currently limited to those available inside Eritrea. The Harris technicians may provide needed systems training if they

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receive visas. The Mission restrictions on off-shore training, currently in place due to the number of LES not returning from training in the U.S., currently limits our staff to on-line courses and on-the-job learning opportunities.

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